

Are You Ready to Make The Leap?

In the last few years, portal software (also known as enterprise Web software) has gained significant transaction in many Fortune 1000 companies. These companies have been convinced that consolidating their mission-critical applications on portal software platforms will be rewarding over the long term. In some cases, in addition to company intranets, customer-facing websites and partner extranets are also being migrated to portal platforms. As a result, a plethora of portal vendors who sell and integrate their software into corporations have emerged.

For a business manager, choosing a portal package is not an easy decision. While the benefits for corporate IT departments are numerous, the advantages to a business division are not readily apparent. And, high-end content management systems, enterprise search solutions, personalization engines and document management systems can provide many of the portal benefits at a lower cost. Here are some recommendations to consider before migrating an intranet or extranet to a portal platform.

Is A Portal Package What You Really Need?

If you're a business manager needing to communicate with your employees or business partners electronically, you've probably had at least one conversation with IT about the benefits of portal technology. And IT has probably explained to you the scalability, versatility, flexibility, modularity and cost effectiveness of implementing a portal package.

But those alone aren't good enough reasons to adopt portal software. Business considerations such as the content migration effort, training of employees or partners, time to roll out the portal software and future resource costs need to be kept in mind. Very often, it is hard to tell whether a portal implementation will result in significant business benefits. Questions like whether the target audiences will actually use the new business applications delivered thru the portal or whether they will make better and more informed business decisions with access to aggregated information on a portal plague most senior managers.

Use the business scenarios listed below to guide your decision making as you decide whether to go the portal route. You will know that a portal package purchase is appropriate for you if most of the scenarios below are applicable.

- 1. You have a large number of users who need to access the information and functionality on the intranet or extranet portal at least once a day.** Intranets and extranets built on portal platforms benefit users who need to access it frequently and cannot afford to spend much time looking for information on regular content managed intranets or extranets.

Keep in mind that there are a few exceptions to this rule. For example, a few years ago, I consulted with a large biotech company that implemented a portal-based intranet for its 1,000-person field sales force. The sales representatives had disparate information and functionality needs based on their location, role, seniority in the organization and the type of medicines that they were selling. In this context, having a portal-based intranet with extensive personalization capabilities was ideal for them.

2. **Your user community is fractured into hundreds of subcommunities with discrete information and functionality needs.** If every employee in your organization needed to access the same information everyday of the year, you certainly wouldn't need to make a portal investment. A simple website with a content management system would suffice. But if half the applications that a user accessed varied based on his role and department, then a portal is more likely to benefit him especially when his role within the organization changes.

A perfect example of a company that took advantage of portal functionality was an automotive manufacturer that needed to communicate with its community of car dealerships across North America. Depending upon the location of the dealership, there were slight variances in car prices and the availability of spare parts. The top two applications accessed by the sales managers in the dealerships were different from the applications that the service managers needed to access to do their jobs. Migrating to a portal-based platform succeeded in enabling the automotive manufacturer to deliver different car prices, availability information and applications based on the specifics of an extranet user's location and role in the car dealership.

3. **Your users are computer savvy, patient and stay in one job long enough to learn how to customize and derive personalization benefits from the portal.** Intranets and extranets built on portal platforms are less usable than regular websites. Most portal vendors limit how much the user interface can be customized to prevent the software from becoming buggy. As a result, most portal packages have user interfaces that are clunky, and relatively unusable for novice computer users.

As a May 2004 IDC research study on portal trends highlighted, the key differentiators for a portal software vendor are its ability to provide functionality that is suited to the knowledge worker and is also easy to use. The article also emphasized that those portal vendors that include functionality such as contextual content management to make the portal more usable will be far more successful. As you choose a portal software, keep in mind the computer savviness of your users and establish ease of use as a criteria.

Also keep in mind that if there is high turnover among your users, adoption of the portal, especially the customization and personalization functionality, will be low. For example, if a large segment of your users are behind-the-counter clerks at national retailers, which are legendary for their high employee turnover, don't expect many of them to be using your extranet a lot.

4. **You have the time and the right skills on your team to invest in scenario design and persona development.** Portal-based intranets and extranets rarely fail because the portal software isn't customized correctly or the hardware is insufficient for the demands being put on the system. The primary reason for their failure is the lack of adoption. In fact, guaranteeing a successful implementation is a lot easier than guaranteeing user adoption.

The only way to manage this risk is by investing in scenario design and persona development, which forces you to study your users, their behavior patterns and the scenarios in which they would use the portal. As a January 2006 Forrester article discussed, B2B sites fail primarily because they're not adopting B2C design methodologies such as scenario design and persona development. Just because you may sit next your users and chat with them everyday in the company cafeteria does not mean you know who they are or how they will use your new portal.

This is even more important in the context of portal software, which limits the modifications that you can make to the user experience. If you're not able to customize the portal package to synchronize with the user scenarios that will drive portal usage, you may want to consider avoiding the portal implementation all together.

- 5. Your organization thrives on information sharing, collaboration and communication.** Some organizations, simply by their corporate DNA, are more appropriate for a portal-based intranet or extranet than others. Organizations that depend on information to execute successfully and to reward knowledge workers who are generous with their insights and experiences are far more likely to derive benefits from a portal-based intranet or extranet than ones that don't.

Portals enable you to aggregate and dynamically represent information for users who have different information needs, usage patterns and preferences. However, if there isn't a strong enough desire to access the information, nothing you can do will make the portal successful. Therefore when choosing whether to invest in portal technology, look around you. Try to imagine how your organization will treat the portal, not just at launch but one, two or even five years down the road. Will content authors still publish to it? Will users still be visiting it and using it as a source of information? Technology can enhance a business but it can rarely transform employee behavior patterns. If your organization doesn't have the "right enabling context," as one of the leading knowledge management experts in the world, Ikujiro Nonaka would explain, your portal initiative is bound to fail.

The risk in an investment in portal technology is greater for the business manager who has to demonstrate business value than for the IT manager who may need to show long-term cost savings. If your portal investment is delivered for the right business reasons, however, it can bring operational benefits and efficiencies. If you have a large number of savvy users, fractured into many subcommunities with disparate, critica, and regular information needs, and you have the resources to follow best-practice design techniques, it may be a perfect situation for a portal implementation.



About the Author

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